

Environmental topics for students

Ontario's Blue Box Program



Ontario's Blue Box program is one of the best in North America. It has helped reduce Ontario's waste going to disposal by 35 per cent since 1987.

Thanks to the Blue Box, in 1997 600,000 tonnes of garbage was kept out of landfills. This is equal to three Skydomes full of garbage.

The Minister's waste diversion plan is a good example of how companies, whose products are collected in the Blue Box, should help make the Blue Box work even better.

Thanks to the people of Ontario, in just 12 years the Blue Box program has grown from several hundred households in the early 1980s to more than 3.7 million households today. Thanks to the Blue Box, in 1997 600,000 tonnes of garbage was kept out of landfill sites which helped them to last longer.

Recycling is important for a lot of other reasons. Every recycled glass jar, pop can or newspaper helps to protect the environment. When companies use recycled material to make a product, they produce less pollution, use less energy and require fewer raw materials. That can only be good for the environment.

For example:

- using recycled paper to make paper products requires 65 per cent less water;
- recycling one tonne of newsprint saves 19 trees;
- recycling one tonne of glass reduces the equivalent of 1,057 kilograms of carbon dioxide emissions (carbon dioxide is one of the greenhouse gases which causes global warming); and,
- recycling one pop can saves enough energy to power the average television set for 108 minutes.

From a few households in a small city...

The Blue Box started as a small project in Kitchener, Ontario in the early 1980s. It spread to other towns and cities until, in 1999, over 90 per cent of Ontario's population is able to use the Blue Box.

Today, towns and cities collect newspapers and all food and beverage containers – like pop cans – made from aluminum, steel, glass and plastic in the Blue Box.

Many also collect magazines, cardboard boxes, writing paper, plastic bags, telephone books and pizza boxes.

But that's only the beginning

In Ontario we believe you should reduce, reuse and recycle. We should first reduce the amount of garbage we produce. One of the ways to do that is to refuse to buy products with too much packaging.

Then we should reuse as many things as we can; like repairing old bicycles or donating to charity stuff we can't use. Only when we've reduced and reused as much as possible, should we recycle.

Ontario's Environment Minister Norm Sterling announced a new plan in October 1998 to help our towns and cities reduce, reuse and recycle even more. This plan will help us to reach our goal of reducing the amount of waste going to disposal by 50 per cent. Not only will the plan help the Blue Box, it will also help our towns and cities compost even more food wastes, such as banana peels, back into soil. It will also help us find ways to reduce and reuse other wastes like the used oil and tires that come from our cars. And it will help us find better ways to dispose of other things that we use in our homes like paints and cleaners.

Under the Minister's plan, companies whose products and/or packaging end up in the Blue Box should help our towns and cities make recycling work even better.

One efficient system is best

Some people have asked the ministry to introduce a deposit-return system for glass and plastic bottles. But that would mean we would have two recycling systems in Ontario: the Blue Box for many materials including

beverage containers, and a deposit-return system just for bottles. That would be too expensive for everyone.

While several Canadian provinces have deposit-return systems for beverage containers, those containers end up getting recycled, just like they do in Ontario.

We want to see the Blue Box expanded, and run more efficiently, because it handles a lot more than bottles, and provides more materials for recycled goods. And it costs only about \$14 per household per year, or about the cost of a chocolate bar every month.

There's another reason, too. Cans and bottles make up only three per cent of all the waste we produce in Ontario each year. The Blue Box program already captures about 50 per cent of those cans and bottles. A deposit-return program would reduce our waste by only another one per cent.

We think it would be better to concentrate our waste diversion efforts on other items in the waste stream... like food wastes which make up 30 per cent of all the garbage we produce in Ontario. And on depots to collect other household wastes - like paints and car engine oils - which can harm our environment if they are not disposed of properly.

Students in the lead

Ontario's students have helped to make the Blue Box program the success it is. You recycle at school, at home, in parks, at community centers, and at arenas. And you create recycling projects for Earth Day, Environment Week and science fairs.

Equally important, students have been recycling for so much of their lives that they are not in the habit of throwing stuff out. Instead, they wonder how they can recycle it. And they encourage their parents to do the same. This is extremely important as Ontario heads toward the next millennium and to a less wasteful future.

A deposit-return system for bottles would only capture an extra one per cent of Ontario's waste stream. It is better to focus on other items like food waste, which make up 30 per cent of all waste, and on household hazardous waste that can harm the environment.

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